Mistaken Strategies: Used by Weak Students- A Review

By Miriam Kopeika

Weak EFL students adopt several mistaken strategies to understand text and/or to perform text-based tasks. The most frequent common denominator of these strategies is that they seem to be symptomatic of a lack of confidence, resulting from poorly developed skills. At the same time, skills that students have are often not appropriately applied because of a fear of the English text.

One example of these strategies, called "musical context," occurs when students change the context to fit what they mistakenly think the word means. Another example, "continuation stories," is when students are attracted to one part of a sentence and read only that, thereby failing to read other important components of the sentence.

This article describes a few such strategies, provides examples of each, explains the cause or causes of such mistaken approaches, and suggests some possible solutions. Teachers can better assist students if they are aware of these mistaken approaches and their causes. Only after such awareness can they help students acquire tools for improving their strategies.

Musical Context

Most of us are familiar with the game Musical Chairs, where one attempts to find any available chair whenever the music stops. In musical context some students, fearing they will fail to understand a given text, latch on to words that seem familiar but are actually misunderstood. For example, Dina thinks she knows what a particular word means, but she is mistaken for a variety of reasons. Since the context is not appropriate to Dina's understanding of the word, she will change the context to suit what she thinks the word means. This unfortunate strategy is surely familiar to experienced EFL reading teachers.

The following sentence for example, serves to illustrate Dina's problematic strategy: "Diagnosis, and therefore therapy, have tended to zero in on the individual, to the exclusion of the contextual components of the anorexia syndrome." Here, "to zero" served as a miscue to Dina, who may have thought it is related to "nothing." She then recreated the context as saying that the individual is unimportant in this approach to anorexia.

Another sentence illustrates the musical context problem: "The psychiatrist intimated that I had hidden masculine drives." Ron, reading this, erroneously substitutes one word for another one. Here he understood that the psychiatrist, driven by masculine drives, became "intimate" with the patient.

Alternate Versions

There are subgroups of musical context. As Arden-Close (1993:892) says, "the appearance of the word can be highly misleading." In Telephone—a game that involves the mishearing of words by participants—the student misreads the word phonologically. "Strangely" will be read as "strongly," or "leave" as "live." The activity Geography involves a misunderstanding of loan words from L1 which have different meanings in L2. For example, in Hebrew, a "report" is a traffic ticket. So in the following sentence, "Susan was required to write a report for her lecturer," a reader might think that Susan moonlighted as a policewoman and had to issue her lecturer a traffic ticket.

In Doctor, students are tempted to dissect a word inappropriately. Of such an error, Arden-Close (1993) says, "This calls in question the commonly used strategy of using prefixes, suffixes, and the root of a word as an aid to meaning. So often is there an extension of the basic meaning of the root or affix that this can often be more of a hindrance than a help." He quotes Nation (1983:89–90): "Once a word has been analysed according to its parts, this guessing at its meaning is more likely to result in twisting the interpretation of the context to modify the guess of the meaning." For example, "millennia" has nothing to do with a mill and "indifferent" does not mean "not different."

Note the following sentence: "Pasteur's work, like Mendel's, has proved to be of momentous importance." Dan believed that "momentous" was related to "momentary," so he misread the context as saying that neither Pasteur's work nor Mendel's work had lasting impact.

One important lesson to be learned from the way students handle these miscues is the importance of the general context to comprehension. As Arden-Close (1993) submits: "The weaker the student, the more likely they are to go with the look of the word, and the more they let this decide the meaning of the unknown word, even when such a meaning flies against the sense of the context." Weaver (1988:145) points to the importance of confirming or correcting a tentative interpretation of the text by checking it against the following context. Obviously one sentence may not be enough to check such an interpretation. A student reading the previously alluded to Pasteur sentence above might rationalize his or her misinterpretation based on the one sentence, in which case the student would be advised to check the succeeding context and perhaps also the preceding one.

How can teachers train students to be more attentive to the context and therefore more accurate in their interpretation of the text? Weaver (1988) addresses the problem as it relates to elementary reading instruction in L1. Her suggestions seem equally applicable to older students facing the situations just described. She proposes using cloze exercises, where the missing word can only be guessed from the context, as a drill to focus students' attention on the context.

An even more accurate reading of the words can be obtained through a complementary approach. Paran (1996) points out that "research findings…strengthen a bottom-up view of the reading process: good readers do not rely on hypothesis formation and prediction as much as is commonly thought. Visual input and bottom-up processing during reading are of great importance." He reaches the conclusion that "if…automaticity of word recognition is indeed a major attribute of the L1 reader's reading behavior, then ways of encouraging automaticity

should be found." He suggests having the student read as extensively as possible, and using "specific exercises to encourage and develop automatic processes." Such exercises include timed word- recognition tasks, where students match words with precisely identical ones hidden within a group of similar words or nonsense words.

Spin the Sentence

Nuttall (1982:33) stated, "One characteristic of an efficient reader is his ability to chunk a text into sense units, each consisting of several words, and each taken in by one fixation of his eyes." So a good reader may chunk: "The good old man / raised his hand / in blessing." He would certainly not chunk: "The good / old man raised his / hand in / blessing."

Ying (1996:683–684) more recently related proper word grouping to the deep structure of the sentence, reflecting semantic meaning. This principle is most obvious in ambiguous sentences. Here is his example of such a sentence, preceded by the context of the paragraph:

"A fireman was running to the scene of a fire carrying a heavy axe. He had to smash down a door. When he got to the scene of the fire, he found a door which had a rusty lock and a door which was nailed shut. The fireman smashed down the door with the rusty lock, but smoke overcame him."

The question, of course, is whether the student understands the rusty lock as describing the door, or as being the instrument with which the fireman smashed down the door. The proper assignment of the phrase can be determined within the context of the previous sentence.

In Spin the Sentence students misconstrue the text by employing improper word grouping. For example, in the following italicized sentence, slashes mark the word grouping Shirley mistakenly adopted, and her resulting inaccurate interpretation follows each word group in parenthesis:

"Simply knowing [It's easy to know that] what another person is prepared [the other guy is better prepared.] / to do in a given situation [The solution is] / prevents much violence in human societies; [to try to make peace]; / just as similar mechanisms do for other species. [other species also try to be peaceful when threatened]."

Some students might need drills in finding logical relationships within sentences and between them, as noted in the section below on Solitaire. Xin-shan (1994:28) claims that "we can reassure our students that the logical relationships they encounter in reading recur constantly and are limited in number. If they learn to identify a definite set of logical relationships with the help of logical devices, they will be able to cope with any relationships found in their readings." He lists 22 such logical relationships and makes practical suggestions for teaching them. In the illustrative sentence, had Shirley been in the habit of looking for cause-effect relationships, she might have noticed that the first part of the sentence up to the word "situation" is the cause, and the next part, up to the semicolon, is the effect. Then she would have better parsed the words into the two large, related groups.

Continuation Stories

In Continuation Stories, a teller will stop at a crucial point in recounting the story. In the EFL reading classroom, out of fear of getting too involved with the text, weak students sometimes leave out crucial parts of the sentence. Possibilities include commencing the reading from the middle of a sentence, often after the subject and verb, or leaving off the end.

For example, David read only the italicized parts of the following sentence: "When a circus came into a town, it was common for the local clergymen to forbid their congregations to attend the circus performance." David therefore thought that congregations habitually attended such performances. Liora read only the first part of this sentence: "My data supported the conclusion that by the mid-1970's long-standing !Kung values, such as the emphasis on intimacy and interdependence, were no longer guiding behavior as effectively as they ever did."

Liora then understood the sentence as meaning that in the mid-1970s intimacy and interdependence were strong values among the !Kung, which of course is the reverse of the actual meaning.

Solitaire

Solitaire is a variation on the Continuation Stories on a larger scale. Here students read one sentence exclusively as if it were isolated from the larger context. Arden-Close (1993:890) states: "Only the stronger students made use of a context wider than a paragraph, and the weakest students made use only of the immediate sentence, latching desperately onto the words they knew."

Witness the single sentence that Rachel chose to read from the following paragraph:

"For many years, investigators did not seriously consider the idea that birth-rank differences could be of environmental origin. It was assumed that children of the same parents grew up in the same environment. Then researchers began to view the family as an organization. From that perspective, it became apparent that children of the same parents do not, after all, grow up in the same environment."

Reading only the one sentence, Rachel could not see the switch in the investigators' emphasis from genetic to environmental influences. She missed the entire context and did not realize that the subject had to do with birth order.

In the case of both the above mistaken approaches, students need to look for the logical relationships, as suggested by Ying (1996). Emphasis in the paragraph on textual markers and connecting words is of great importance, such as in the words "for many years," "then," and "from that perspective" in the preceding paragraph.

As in Musical Context, here too students need to be taught to refer to previous or subsequent context to check their tentative interpretations of the text.

Pin the Tail on the Text

This approach involves finding some similar-looking word(s) in the text and fashioning an answer.

Witness the following question referring to an article on population growth in the United States:

"Why did the author choose California to study?" The appropriate paragraph says:

"To arrive at some estimates of what accounts for the recent rise in fertility in the United States, one must turn to states which possess the appropriate information. These states can then serve as surrogate sources. Such statistics are available from the largest state, California. While California may not be the ideal model for the entire nation…it is often considered the vanguard for social developments that sometimes reach the remaining 49 states…."

Benny, looking for "California," saw that it was the largest state, and chose the answer which said: "because California is the largest state," which, although factually true, did not answer the question. A better answer would have been: "because California had the information needed to test the theory."

Students need to focus on understanding what the question asks, locating the answer in the text, understanding the answer from the text, and only then answering the question.

Mr. Potato Head

Here students either make the assumption that the author is an idiot or indulge in wishful thinking. In the first case, the students may actually know or think they know more about the subject or have more recent information than the author; in the second case, they may make assumptions about what the author wants to say. Arden-Close (1993:868) quotes Cooper (1984:128): "Unpracticed readers showed a tendency to use previous knowledge that was irrelevant to the context."

Exemplifying such misreadings would require citing long texts. However, the idea is illustrated by recounting the main idea of an article by Liebman (1993), "The Myth of Defeat: The Memory of the Yom Kippur War in Israeli Society." As the title implies, the author thinks the war has been viewed as a failure but could have been interpreted as a success. However, a student with a preconceived notion might not realize that the author thinks it a misinterpretation to call the war a defeat.

A more concrete example can be cited in the answer to a question on an article about a failed marriage. The question "According to the author, should Barbara have gone to a marriage counselor?"

The author's thesis is that a marriage counselor would have saved the marriage, but that it was not worth saving and Barbara would still have been very unhappy. Leah, a student, was convinced that the happiest framework for a young woman is in marriage and answered that, yes, Barbara should have gone to a counselor.

Misunderstandings of this sort are usually of major import and are the result of a total misreading of the text. Study skills appropriate in the students' native language and in a foreign language, such as SQ3R, (Dubin, Eskay, and Grabe 1986:148–9), can help students find the needed information or the author's viewpoint on a subject. These SQ3R steps are to survey, using a previewing skimming technique; to question, formulating questions the student thinks will be answered in a section of the text; to read, while mentally answering the questions; to recite, rephrasing the ideas in the student's mind; and to review, going over the text as a whole.

Conclusion

The strategies reviewed in this article result from students' lack of confidence in their comprehension of EFL texts, often making it difficult for them to use the skills they would normally use in reading their native language. Perhaps texts in the native language might be used to illustrate how to use these skills.

Auerbach and Paxton (1997:abstract) point out that "recent L2 research suggests that readers' metacognitive awareness of their reading processes and strategies enhances proficiency." Therefore, teachers should make learners aware of the skills they are or should be using.

With attention, teachers can help weak students understand what the authors are saying by using strategies that develop their reading skills.

References

Arden-Close, C. 1993. NNS Readers Strategies for inferring the meanings of unknown words. Reading a Foreign Language, 9, 2, pp. 867–893.

Auerbach, E., and D. Paxton. 1997. It's not the English thing: Bringing reading research into the ESL classroom. TESOL Quarterly, 31, 2, pp. 237–257.

Cooper, M. 1984. Linguistic competence of practised and unpractised non-native readers of English. Eds. Alderson and Urquhart. pp. 122–135.

Dubin, F., D. Eskay, and W. Grabe (eds.) 1986. Teaching second language reading for academic purposes. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Liebman, C. 1993. The myth of defeat: The memory of the Yom Kippur War in Israeli society. Middle Eastern Studies, 29, 3, pp. 399–418.

Nation, I. 1983. Teaching and learning vocabulary. Wellington: English Language Institute, Wellington University.

Nuttall, C. 1982. Teaching reading skills in a foreign language. London: Heinemann.

Paran, A. 1996. Reading in EFL: Facts and fiction. ELT Journal, 50, 1, pp. 25–34.

Urquhart, A. H. 1984. Reading in a foreign language. London: Longman.

Weaver, C. 1988. Reading process and practice. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Xin-shan, D. 1994. Toward a text-centered approach to reading. English Teaching Forum, 32, 4, pp. 28–30.

Ying, H. G. 1996. Multiple constraints on processing ambiguous sentences: Evidence from adult L2 learners. Language Learning, 46, 4, pp. 681–711.

Miriam Kopeika teaches EFL at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel.